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SUBJECT: BACK TO SCHOOL: SERBIA'S HIGHER EDUCATION STRUGGLES TO  
BECOME MORE EFFECTIVE

#### SUMMARY

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1. Serbia's higher education system is academically diverse and decentralized, with institutions varying significantly in terms of enrollment numbers, tuition costs, graduation rates, and overall adaptability. While the reforms of the European Bologna Declaration facilitated greater student mobility within Europe, it remains difficult for students studying in the United States to get credits and degrees validated in Serbia, where implementation of Bologna reforms is spotty and at a relatively early phase. University graduates in Serbia have trouble landing jobs upon graduation, but some Serbian universities are taking steps to better match higher education to workforce demands. End Summary.

#### THE BASICS OF SERBIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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2. Despite significant government oversight of higher education, the system in Serbia is decentralized in terms of academic decisions, allowing "faculties" significant autonomy in major decisions. Faculties in Serbia are similar to academic departments and colleges in the United States, but are considered independent legal entities. Serbia has seven public universities with 82 faculties; however these figures include the University of Pristina in Kosovo. Serbia has six accredited private universities with 44 faculties. In addition, there are two public faculties and five private faculties that are unaffiliated with universities. Other institutions of higher learning include 48 accredited post-secondary vocational institutions. The latest available enrollment statistics from the Serbian Statistical Office's 2008 Yearbook indicate that there were a total of 238,710 students enrolled in higher education in Serbia during the 2006-2007 academic year. Outdated statistics showed that only 7% of students were enrolled in private institutions. However, Snezana Mijatovic, a Program Manager for the U.S.-sponsored FORECAST exchange program, told us that private faculties had been increasing in popularity in the last several years.

3. Students' average tuition differed considerably according to the faculty attended and how much financing they received from the state. Dr. Sладana Benkovic, Assistant Professor at the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Organizational Sciences told us that each year the Education Ministry negotiated with each public faculty to determine the number of students that would receive full tuition. According to Elizabeth Chung, the Executive Director of the U.S.-supported International Academic Center, the remaining students pay some or all of their tuition. The 2008 yearbook reports that 47% of the students' tuition was fully financed during the 2006-2007 academic year. Chung said that tuition at private faculties was generally higher than at public faculties, ranging from \$2200 to \$7200 per year.

4. According to the latest available statistics in Serbia's 2004-2005 Bologna Process National Report written by the Education Ministry it took students an average of 7.48 years to graduate.

Approximately 40% of students did not graduate. Dr. Benkovic said that at her faculty one of the reasons for the low graduation rate was that students found jobs before they completed their final year of study and never returned to graduate.

15. Mijatovic said that public universities had very strong traditions in Serbia, but they were often criticized for their bureaucracy and lack of adaptability. Private universities were perceived as inferior to public universities, although the perception had been changing in the last several years, Mijatovic claimed. Ana Jovancai, a teaching assistant at Megatrend University, a private university in Belgrade, told us that private faculties were often considered easier than public faculties, but this was primarily because private faculties were more student-oriented and provided students with better guidance. Mijatovic said that private universities were often smaller, more adaptable, and offered newer fields of studies that were unavailable at public universities, such as management and information technology. Because of their adaptability private universities were considered better at implementing the Bologna reforms.

#### A ROCKY TRANSITION TO THE BOLOGNA SYSTEM

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16. In September 2003, Serbia signed the Bologna Declaration on education reform that was implemented throughout Europe. The September 2005 Higher Education Law incorporated the legal mechanisms to implement the Bologna Declaration. While many European countries spent several years preparing to implement the Bologna reforms, Serbia pushed reforms rapidly, with limited preparation, because fulfillment of the Bologna principals was a requirement for European Union accession, according to Mijatovic. Consequently, professors

#### BECOME MORE EFFECTIVE

and administrators did not have the necessary training or understanding of the new measures, and implementation had produced mixed results. Mijatovic estimated that only about 20% of faculties had successfully implemented reforms, while others had tried to fit the Bologna Process into the old system without making necessary changes. The Bologna process was designed to make higher education more student-centered, Mijatovic said. It required professors to integrate group projects, homework, or other interactive teaching methods into courses that fulfill specific expected learning outcomes.

17. The Bologna Process also facilitated student mobility. It established the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), creating standardized credits that could more easily be transferred between educational institutions in Bologna system. Ivana Vujkov, Head of the International Office at the University of Novi Sad, said that the system set standards for ECTS credits according to the number of hours students needed to achieve expected learning outcomes. Students were required to attend all lectures and to complete a certain number of hours of work for each course before they were eligible to take the exams for the course. While determining ECTS credit values had worked well in some faculties, professors in a majority of faculties had arbitrarily set the number of ECTS credits for their course, which had made it difficult for students to fulfill the requirements, Mijatovic said. She added that the first generation of students to enter faculties with the Bologna reforms in place graduated this spring and that it would take time to establish best practices and to make the reforms more effective.

#### VALIDATING U.S. DEGREES REMAINS TEDIOUS

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18. The Law on Universities regulates foreign diploma validation and equivalence of foreign school documents, but the process is decentralized and individual faculties set their own rules. Vujkov told us the ECTS system simplified the process for students studying in Europe, because in some Serbian faculties students' credits were automatically acknowledged, although this was still relatively rare. All other students, including those who studied in the United States, must go through a longer process to get their credits validated. In many faculties students have to present syllabi of the courses they took abroad to individual professors at their faculty. If the

professor deemed the course as similar enough to the course he or she offered, the professor would accept the credits, Mijatovic told us. In other faculties, committees of professors within the faculty made decisions about whether to accept credits. The process was similar for the accreditation of diplomas. According to Mijatovic, students must find a faculty that offered their degree and get individual courses approved. She went on to say that in most cases faculties did not fully accredit degrees, but required students to pass additional courses or exams to get full accreditation. Faculties and individual professors varied widely in terms of their flexibility.

¶9. The FORECAST exchange program in Serbia received about 120 applications per year for students applying to study at U.S. Colleges and Universities. Increasingly students were choosing to study in Europe instead of the United States because getting credits and degrees validated was often easier, they could be closer to their families, and students who anticipated living in Serbia were more interested in building their professional networks in Europe, Mijatovic said.

#### GRADUATES HAVE LONG JOB SEARCHES

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¶10. In a presentation at the 2009 Danube Rectors' Conference Workshop in Zadar, Croatia, Milica Bojkovic from International Office at the University of Novi Sad cited April 2009 statistics from the Serbian National Employment Service (NES) to highlight the disconnect between labor market demands and Serbia's higher education system. The NES report showed that in March 2009 that there were only 7721 people employed for every 9403 jobs in the finance, accounting, and banking in Serbia. Conversely, Serbia had too many people trained as telecommunications professionals, sociologists, psychologists, and educators. For the education and humanities sector there were 9,996 unemployed for every 1,393 jobs offered according to the NES report. Despite efforts to improve employment statistics of young graduates, much work remains in terms of moving universities from a supply oriented towards a demand oriented university system.

#### COMMENT

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¶11. While faculties are decentralized on academic issues, there is significant political influence on public universities, which are heavily dependent upon the government for funding and patronage. The ad hoc nature of the Serbian education system, entrenched interests and the short implementation timeframe made it difficult for Serbian faculties to effectively institute the Bologna reforms. The ECTS credit system increases the mobility of Serbian students in Europe, and the trend of students choosing to study in Europe instead of the United States will only become more pronounced as Serbia strengthens its relationship with the EU. In order to grow and meet the needs of Serbia's changing economy faculties will need to reform their curriculum so that students are employable upon graduation. End Comment.

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